

FINDINGS: The government of Vietnam continues to control government-approved religious communities, severely restrict independent religious practice, and repress individuals and groups viewed as challenging political authority. Religious activity continues to grow in Vietnam and the government has made some important changes in the past decade in response to international attention, including its designation as a “country of particular concern” (CPC). Nevertheless, individuals continue to be imprisoned or detained for reasons related to their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy; police and government officials are not held fully accountable for abuses; independent religious activity remains illegal; legal protections for government-approved religious organizations are both vague and subject to arbitrary or discriminatory interpretations based on political factors; and new converts to some Protestant and Buddhist communities face discrimination and pressure to renounce their faith. In addition, improvements experienced by some religious communities are not experienced by others, including the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), independent Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Protestant groups, and some ethnic minority Protestants and Buddhists. Property disputes between the government and the Catholic Church continue to lead to harassment, property destruction, and violence, sometimes by “contract thugs” hired by the government to break up peaceful prayer vigils. In the past year, the government harassed monks and nuns associated with Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh and forcibly disbanded his order.

Given these ongoing and serious violations, the uneven pace of religious freedom progress after the CPC designation was lifted, the continued detention of prisoners of concern, and new evidence of severe religious freedom abuses, USCIRF again recommends that Vietnam be designated as a CPC in 2010. The Commission has recommended that Vietnam be named a (CPC) every year since 2001. The State Department named Vietnam a CPC in 2004 and 2005, but removed the designation in 2006.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS: Religious freedom conditions have not improved as quickly or as readily as have other areas of the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship, and there continues to be a marked deterioration of the human rights situation overall. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that the government of Vietnam will engage on human rights concerns. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have engaged Hanoi on religious freedom concerns over the past year, and religious freedom was a part of the renewed annual

U.S.-Vietnam human rights dialogue. However, the frequency of these exchanges is neither as structured nor as focused on concrete results as those that took place between 2004 and 2006, when Vietnam was named a CPC and was seeking entrance to the World Trade Organization (WTO). USCIRF continues to urge the Obama administration to re-evaluate the diplomatic and political resources employed to advance religious freedom and related human rights in its relations with Vietnam. USCIRF also encourages the Administration to view CPC designation as a flexible tool in light of its previous success in spurring serious diplomatic engagement and achieving measurable improvements, while not hampering progress on other areas in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy towards Vietnam can be found in the 2010 Annual Report chapter on Vietnam.